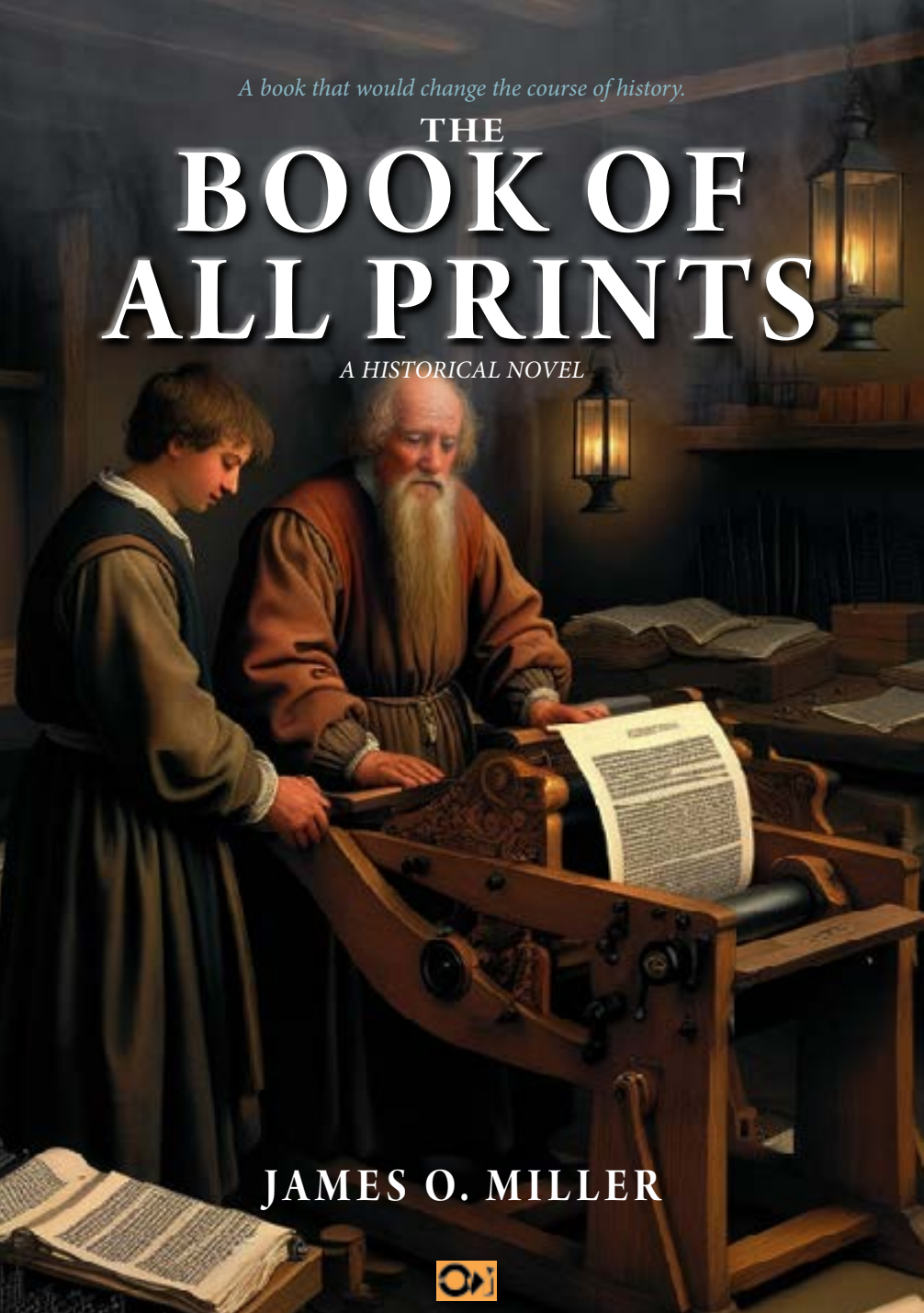
A book that would change the course of history.

THE BOOK OF ALL PRINTS

A HISTORICAL NOVEL



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James O. Miller

The book of all prints

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The air in Mainz was thick with the chill of midnight, the city blanketed by shadows so deep they seemed to swallow the streetlights whole. The only light came from a single lantern that swung on the workbench inside Gutenberg's workshop, casting long, flickering shadows across piles of paper and blocks of metal type. The rhythmic sound of metal clicking against metal filled the otherwise silent room as young Thomas Müller wiped the sweat from his brow. His fingers, still slick with ink, were steady as he arranged the tiny pieces of movable type in neat rows. At just sixteen, Thomas was an apprentice at the workshop, but already his hands had grown accustomed to the delicate precision required to create the world's first movable type press.

His dreams were simple, one day, he would set the type for the Bible itself. A book that would change the course of history. But in the quiet of that darkened room, as the weight of the press loomed heavy in his mind, something felt wrong. The hair on the back of his neck stood up.

A sudden whisper, sharp and urgent, shattered the silence.

"Thomas!"

He spun around, heart racing. In the doorway stood Wilhelm, one of the senior printers, his face pale under the glow of the lantern. His eyes darted nervously, scanning the streets beyond the workshop as if expecting something to step out of the darkness.

"What is it?" Thomas whispered, his voice tight with unease.

Wilhelm stepped closer, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps. "There's something wrong," he said, his voice low and strained. "A group of men... strange-looking, wearing dark coats. They've been asking about the workshop. They're not from Mainz."

Thomas felt a cold weight settle in his stomach. His hand instinctively went to the pouch at his waist, the

one that held a small vial of ink, sacred ink, the very first batch Gutenberg had ever made. It was meant for the first Bible, for the Book that would change everything. But these men? This wasn't just about ink or type. No, this was something deeper, something far more dangerous.

"Have they seen us?" Thomas asked, barely daring to breathe.

Wilhelm's eyes flicked to the side, his face tightening. "No, but they're close. Too close."

Thomas's pulse quickened, his mind racing. He had heard rumours. Whispers in the dark of taverns about men—foreign agents, mercenaries—who would stop at nothing to steal Gutenberg's secret. Movable type. It was the future. It was the power to change the world. And it was more valuable than gold.

"We need to warn Master Gutenberg," Thomas said, his voice suddenly firm.

Wilhelm nodded. "Get the message to him. I'll gather what we can. If they're after what I think they are, we'll need more than just type to stop them."

Thomas reached for the nearest sheet of paper and

quickly scribbled a note to Gutenberg, his hands trembling slightly. He knew what this could mean. It wasn't just about printing anymore. It was a matter of life and death.

Suddenly, the unmistakable sound of horses' hooves echoed through the street outside, sharp and urgent. Wilhelm tensed, his eyes wide with alarm.

"They're here," Wilhelm hissed. "We don't have much time."

The sound of the hooves grew louder, closer. Thomas could hear the creak of leather, the soft clink of swords being drawn. His heart pounded in his chest, and the weight of Gutenberg's secret pressed heavily on him. What would they do if they got their hands on it? What would happen to him, to the press?

Without waiting for another word, Thomas grabbed the note and rushed to the door, stepping out into the dark alley behind the workshop. The smell of wet stone and damp wood filled his nostrils. The rain had started to fall, a fine mist that hung in the air like a veil. Wilhelm was already a few paces ahead, glancing back toward the street as he disappeared into the darkness.

"Come on, Thomas," he called, his voice low. "We can't risk staying here."

Thomas nodded and followed, his boots slapping against the wet cobblestones. Every shadow felt like a threat. Every corner seemed to hold an enemy. He could hear the clink of metal from the approaching horsemen. They were closing in.

The two of them moved swiftly through the labyrinth of alleyways, past the darkened houses and empty stalls. Thomas' mind raced. Should they split up? Lead them away from the workshop? Or should they risk everything and head straight for Gutenberg's hideout, the small, unmarked building on the other side of the city?

The decision was taken from him when Wilhelm suddenly stopped.

"They're here," Wilhelm whispered, his voice urgent. "We need to hide. Now."

Thomas barely had time to react before Wilhelm pulled him into the shadows of a narrow alleyway. They pressed themselves against the cold stone of a building, hearts pounding in their chests as the sound of hooves grew louder. The riders passed by,

their shadows moving like ghosts through the mist. Thomas could feel his breath catch in his throat, the tension unbearable. They were so close. So dangerously close.

"They've gone," Wilhelm whispered after what felt like an eternity. "But we can't wait any longer."

Thomas nodded. "We need to warn Gutenberg. Now."

They moved swiftly through the alleys, always watching, always listening. Every creak of a door, every distant voice seemed to echo louder in the silence of the night. When they reached the small door that led to Gutenberg's hideout, Thomas pounded on it with all his strength.

"Master Gutenberg! Master Gutenberg!" he shouted.

The door opened a crack, revealing a tired-eyed Gutenberg standing in the shadows. His gaze was sharp, assessing.

"Thomas? Wilhelm? What's wrong?"

"Men," Wilhelm said, his voice clipped. "Foreigners. They're looking for the workshop. We need to move the press. Now."

Gutenberg's eyes narrowed, a flash of understanding crossing his face. "How many?"

"At least five," Thomas replied. "Armed and dangerous."

Gutenberg's face darkened. "Then we don't have time to waste. Get the movable type. We leave at once."

Thomas and Wilhelm moved quickly, grabbing what they could. Gutenberg stood at the door, his hand on the hilt of a small dagger. His eyes were fierce, his mouth set in a tight line. They couldn't afford to fail. Not now.

"Where should we go?" Thomas asked, his voice tight with fear.

"There's a safehouse," Gutenberg said. "Near the river. We'll make our way there. But we leave now."

The sound of horses' hooves reached their ears again. This time, it was closer. The men were returning. Gutenberg looked at them all one last time, his face grim.

"Get ready. Stay close."

As they stepped into the alley, the hooves came faster, louder. And then, suddenly, the unmistakable sound of a shout.

"There they are!"

The chase had begun.

I.

The air in Mainz had a certain stillness to it, a tension that seemed to hang in the city like a storm cloud. The streets, usually full of the clamour of merchants and street vendors, were oddly quiet. Thomas Müller, just sixteen, felt a knot twist in his stomach as he moved through the alleyways of the city with Wilhelm, his senior in the printing workshop. The lanterns overhead flickered weakly against the growing darkness, casting long, flickering shadows across the cobblestones.

He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The kind of wrong that gnawed at your bones. It wasn't just the sense of the approaching nightfall, nor was it the quiet, an unsettling silence that made every sound feel amplified. It was a deeper, more primal feeling, a sense of being watched.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" Thomas muttered under his breath, glancing over his shoulder, half-expecting to see someone lurking in the shadows. But the streets were empty, save for the occasional rat scurrying in the gutters.

Wilhelm, older by a decade but with a nervous energy that made him seem even more tense, nodded grimly. "You've got good instincts, Thomas. I can feel it too."

The two of them moved quickly, keeping to the darker paths, avoiding the main roads where they might be seen. The workshop had been their life for years now Thomas had joined as an apprentice just over two years ago but now, everything was shifting. A whisper had spread through Mainz, through Europe even, of what Gutenberg had accomplished, of the press he had created. It was supposed to change everything, to bring the written word to the masses. But with that power, came danger.

"I'm telling you, those men weren't from around here," Wilhelm muttered, his voice low. "They've been asking too many questions. And I don't trust it. Not at all."

"Do you think they've figured out what we're doing?" Thomas asked, his voice tight.

"They might," Wilhelm replied, his gaze darting back and forth. "They've got spies everywhere. I wouldn't be surprised if they've been watching us for weeks."

Thomas's heart skipped a beat. The Bible was almost ready for print. The first Bible. And they were on the verge of something monumental. If anyone knew what Gutenberg had, the invention that could change the course of history, they'd stop at nothing to steal it.

The sound of distant footsteps broke through their conversation. Both men froze, their eyes locking. It wasn't just the footfalls, they were quick, deliberate, and unmistakably close.

"I think they're here," Wilhelm said, his voice barely a whisper, a bead of sweat forming on his brow.

Thomas's pulse quickened. He could feel the adrenaline surging through his veins. They were too close. It was time to move.

The two of them sprinted forward, rounding a corner into the narrow street that led to the inn where Gutenberg had been staying. The low brick building loomed ahead, its door closed, but the lantern in the window flickered like a beacon in the night.

Thomas slammed his fist against the door three times, sharp, urgent knocks, just like they had practiced.

The door creaked open, revealing Gutenberg standing in the dim light of the hallway, his spectacles gleaming in the flickering lantern light. His face, usually so calm and calculated, was drawn tight with worry. His eyes flicked from Wilhelm to Thomas, his gaze hardening.

"The men?" Gutenberg asked, his voice calm, but with an edge of urgency.

Wilhelm stepped forward, his face pale. "Not seen, but they're close. Too close. We need to move, Master Gutenberg."

Gutenberg's eyes narrowed as he took a step back, motioning them into the small, cluttered room. "Then we have no time to waste. Take the movable type. Everything. Now."

Thomas's hands trembled as he reached for the stack of metal blocks, each one etched with letters, the very foundation of Gutenberg's masterpiece. The ink was still fresh on some of them, the smell of it sharp in the air. As he grabbed the pieces, he could

feel the weight of what they were carrying—the future of the printed word, the first Bible to be set on a press. They couldn't let it fall into the wrong hands.

Wilhelm grabbed the remaining blocks, shoving them into a leather bag. The urgency in his movements mirrored Thomas's own.

But then, the unmistakable sound of a scream echoed from the street outside, a high, terrified wail that sent a chill running down Thomas's spine. The footsteps, now unmistakably heavier, quicker, drew closer.

Gutenberg's eyes met theirs, and for the first time, Thomas saw a flicker of something in the master printer's gaze ...fear. Real fear.

"Go!" Gutenberg barked, his voice suddenly harsh. "Take the type and leave through the back! Don't stop!"

Thomas didn't need to be told twice. The workshop was no longer safe. As he grabbed the last of the type, the sound of boots slamming against the door echoed through the small space. They had found them.

"Run!" Gutenberg shouted again, his eyes burning with urgency.

The three of them bolted from the room, through the back door that opened into an alleyway. The night air hit Thomas like a wall, cold and sharp. The rain had begun to fall in thick, heavy sheets, soaking them instantly. The cobblestone streets glistened with moisture, making it hard to find their footing as they ran.

They sprinted through the alley, turning corners at random, desperately trying to shake off any pursuit. Thomas could hear the sound of their pursuers' boots slamming against the stones, closing in. They were so close now, the sound of their heavy steps deafening in the night.

"Not far now," Wilhelm panted, glancing behind them. "Keep going! Just a few more blocks!"

Thomas's legs burned as they pushed harder, the weight of the type pressing against him. They were carrying the future of printing, the future of knowledge itself, and they couldn't afford to lose it.

Then came the voice, cold and commanding, cutting through the storm and rain.

"There they are! Stop them!"

It was too late. The men chasing them had spotted them.

Wilhelm cursed, pulling out a small knife from his belt. “We need to fight our way out. Get ready!”

Thomas drew a breath, pulling his own small blade from his side. His heart was hammering in his chest, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He didn’t know who these men were, but they wouldn’t take what Gutenberg had built. Not without a fight.

A figure emerged from the shadows ahead, cloaked in black, his face obscured. Behind him, several others followed, weapons drawn, their faces grim and determined.

“You’re not going anywhere,” the leader sneered, his voice thick with an accent that was unfamiliar.

Thomas’s mind raced. He looked at Wilhelm, then at Gutenberg, who was already positioning himself to block the path.

“Stand your ground!” Gutenberg barked. “We fight to protect the press!”

With that, the air exploded into chaos. The first attacker lunged toward Wilhelm, but Wilhelm was quick, parrying the strike with his knife and sending the man stumbling backward. Thomas moved instinctively, swinging his blade to block another strike aimed at him, his muscles screaming with effort.

The rain poured down in sheets, but it was the cold, gleaming steel that dominated the night. Thomas's heart raced as he fought, adrenaline pumping through his veins. They couldn't lose. Not tonight.

Through the chaos, a sharp cry rang out. Wilhelm had been struck, a deep gash across his side. He staggered but didn't fall, gritting his teeth in pain as he swung his knife again.

"Move!" Gutenberg yelled. "This way!"

Thomas didn't hesitate. He followed Gutenberg, pulling Wilhelm with him, as the fight raged on behind them. They had to keep moving. They had to survive.

They couldn't let the secret fall into enemy hands. Not now.

They reached the end of the alley, and Gutenberg threw open a hidden door leading to a cellar. It was dark, damp, and musty, but it was safe for the moment. They tumbled inside, breathing heavily, their clothes soaked through.

"Stay quiet," Gutenberg whispered, his voice sharp. "They'll be looking for us."

Thomas nodded, his heart still pounding. But there was no time to rest. They had just barely escaped with their lives and the press that would change the world.

II.

The rain was relentless, beating down in heavy sheets on the cobblestone streets of Mainz. The flickering lanterns cast long shadows, their orange light reflecting off the slick pavement, making everything seem unreal, like a nightmare waiting to consume them. Thomas and Wilhelm moved swiftly, their footsteps echoing through the narrow alleyways, each breath sharp in the damp air.

The type they carried was more than just a precious bundle of metal, it was the heart of the revolution that Gutenberg had set in motion. It would change the world. But for now, it was the very thing that would get them killed if they weren't careful.

"Where to now?" Wilhelm panted, his voice strained from the sprint, his eyes wide with fear.

"There's a safehouse near the river," Thomas said, his mind already calculating the fastest route. "We can hide there. Wait until it blows over."

But as they turned another corner, the harsh, unmistakable clink of boots on stone reached their ears. They both froze, listening. A moment later, five men appeared at the far end of the street, blocking their path. They were dressed in long, dark coats, their faces hidden beneath soaked hoods. Their eyes glinted with cold malice.

"Turn back, boy," one of them said, his voice like gravel scraping against metal. "Give us the type, and you might leave here with your life."

Thomas felt his stomach lurch, a cold chill running through him. The men were trained, dangerous, and they knew exactly what they were after.

"Not going to happen," Thomas said, his voice low and steady, despite the pounding of his heart. He glanced at Wilhelm, then back at the men. There was no negotiating. Not with them.

He broke into a sprint without another word, pushing past Wilhelm, his legs pumping hard as he tried to widen the gap. His mind raced as the sound

of boots echoed behind him, closing in with every step. He could hear Wilhelm's heavy breath behind him, but there was no time to check if his friend was keeping up.

They had to escape.

"Thomas!" Wilhelm shouted. "Wait for me!"

But Thomas didn't look back. He couldn't afford to. Not now.

The street ahead was narrow, winding, and slippery with rainwater. The walls seemed to close in as they ran, the sound of their pursuers growing louder. A glance over his shoulder revealed that the men weren't far behind. One of them, the largest of the group, was gaining ground fast. Thomas's heart skipped a beat. The man's dark, menacing eyes were fixed on him like a hawk targeting its prey.

"Keep running!" Thomas shouted, but his voice barely carried above the pounding of the rain.

Suddenly, there was a crash behind him, a sickening thud followed by Wilhelm's shout of pain. Thomas's blood ran cold. He looked back, just for a second, to see his friend sprawled on the ground, his leg caught beneath a jagged stone.

“Wilhelm!” Thomas screamed, but there was no time to help him. He was too far ahead now.

He had to go. He had to protect the press.

Thomas turned back to the street ahead, but his chest tightened with guilt. He knew Wilhelm was hurt, but there was no way he could stop now. If those men got their hands on the type... The revolution would be over before it even started.

A scream of pain tore from Wilhelm’s throat, but Thomas pushed forward, his feet pounding against the wet stones, his breath ragged in his chest.

The alleyway loomed ahead, a narrow, dark passage between buildings. If he could just make it there, he might lose them. He darted toward it, his legs aching, his mind focused solely on escape.

But just as he reached the alley’s mouth, he felt a strong grip on his shoulder, yanking him backward.

“Not so fast, boy,” a voice hissed, sharp and cold against his ear.

Thomas’s breath caught in his throat as the steel of a knife pressed against his throat. He froze, every muscle in his body tensing with fear. He could hear

the sound of rain splashing around him, but it felt like everything had stopped, the world narrowed to the cold steel at his neck and the looming figures of the men behind him.

"Drop it," the man growled, twisting the knife just enough to remind Thomas of what was at stake. "Give us the type, and we might just let you go."

Thomas's heart hammered in his chest. He could feel the press of the knife, sharp and unforgiving against his skin. His fingers tingled with the urge to fight back, but he knew there was nothing he could do. Not like this. Not without risking everything.

He swallowed hard, his eyes scanning the alley, looking for anything, a way out, a distraction. But all he saw were the stone walls, slick and treacherous with rain.

"Wilhelm..." he muttered, but it was lost in the pounding of the rain.

"Don't think about your friend, boy," the man sneered, his breath hot and foul against Thomas's cheek. "He's already where he belongs."

The words hit Thomas like a punch to the gut. He had no idea what had happened to Wilhelm, but he

knew one thing: he couldn't let these men win. Not now.

"Do you know what you're stealing?" Thomas whispered, his voice hoarse. "This isn't just some gold or silver you're after. This... this is the future."

The man scoffed, his grip tightening on Thomas's arm. "The future? What's that to me?"

Thomas's mind raced. He couldn't let them take the type. He had to protect it—he had to protect Gutenberg's work.

And then, as if on cue, there was a sound—a loud, deliberate clang of metal hitting stone. From the shadows of the alley came Wilhelm, his face pale but his eyes burning with fierce resolve. He was limping, but he was still alive.

"Let him go!" Wilhelm shouted, his voice raw but filled with a fire that made the hairs on Thomas's neck stand up.

The man holding Thomas turned, his knife momentarily leaving Thomas's throat as he glared at Wilhelm. That was all the opening Thomas needed.

He spun around, bringing his elbow up sharply

into the man's ribs. The man grunted in pain, staggering back for just a second, but it was enough. Thomas kicked out with all his strength, sending the man sprawling to the wet ground.

"Run!" Wilhelm shouted, reaching for Thomas's arm, pulling him toward the mouth of the alley.

They didn't need to be told twice. They bolted into the rain, the sound of pounding feet echoing behind them. But the men weren't done yet. They recovered quickly, yelling and giving chase, their footsteps growing louder once more.

Thomas's breath was ragged, his body aching with exhaustion. But they couldn't stop—not now. Not when they were so close.

They rounded a corner and found themselves facing the river. A narrow wooden bridge stretched across it, leading to the other side of the city.

"There!" Wilhelm shouted. "The safehouse is just beyond that bridge!"

Without hesitation, Thomas and Wilhelm sprinted toward the bridge. The rain lashed at their faces, blurring their vision, but they kept going, their footsteps pounding in unison with the relentless downpour.

Behind them, the men were closing in, but they were getting slower. The wet ground was working against them, making every step more treacherous. Thomas could hear the shouts of the men, but he didn't dare look back.

As they neared the bridge, a figure appeared at the far end, dark, tall, and looming like a shadow against the storm. Thomas's heart leapt into his throat. Was it an ally? Or was it someone else?

"Keep running!" Wilhelm urged, pulling Thomas forward.

The figure didn't move, but as they came closer, Thomas could see the unmistakable outline of a crossbow—aimed directly at them.

"Stop!" the figure called out in a low, commanding voice. "If you take one more step, I'll drop you where you stand."

III.

The darkness of the narrow alley swallowed them whole, the shadows cast by the crumbling buildings stretching like specters across the wet cobblestones. Thomas's pulse raced, his breath shallow as the cold steel of the knife bit deeper into his throat. The rain continued to fall in sheets, but it was the presence of the men surrounding him that made everything feel even colder. His heart pounded in his chest, every beat echoing like a drum in his ears.

"Don't make a sound, boy," the thug growled, his grip tightening around Thomas's throat. "You'll wish you hadn't."

Thomas could barely breathe, the pressure making his head swim. He wanted to fight back, to lash out, but his arms were pinned to his sides by the brute's heavy hands. His mind raced—if he didn't think of something fast, this was how it would end.

Just as his vision began to blur, a voice cut through the thick tension like a blade.

"Let him go."

It was a familiar voice... Gutenberg. Thomas's heart skipped a beat as the figure appeared in the shadows of the doorway ahead. His silhouette was barely visible in the gloom, but there was no mistaking it.

The thug holding Thomas stiffened, his eyes flicking nervously toward the source of the voice. "You," the man snarled. "You're the master of the press."

Gutenberg stepped forward, his form coming into full view as he moved into the dim light. Beside him, a tall figure draped in a dark cloak stood motionless, his face hidden in shadow. The cloaked man's presence was imposing, silent, watchful, like a predator poised to strike.

Gutenberg's face was stern, his eyes icy and unyielding. "I am," he said, his voice calm, but there was an undeniable edge to it. "And you are in my city, threatening my apprentice. What is it that you want?"

For a moment, there was silence, an oppressive, suffocating silence. The thug holding Thomas's throat glanced at his companions, as if weighing his

next move. Then, slowly, he lowered the knife just a fraction. His voice trembled slightly, betraying his anxiety. "The Bible," he spat, the words coming out as though he were confessing to a sin. "The power of the word. We will stop at nothing to control it."

Thomas's mind raced as the gravity of the situation set in. These men weren't simple thieves. They understood the significance of what Gutenberg had created, and they would kill to control it. The Bible, the first book ever printed, wasn't just a book. It was the key to knowledge, to power. And they wanted it.

Thomas felt a surge of fear, but it was quickly replaced by a gnawing sense of determination. He wasn't going to let these men destroy everything Gutenberg had worked for. Not after everything they had been through.

Gutenberg's eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening with resolve. "I suggest you leave now," he said, his voice cold as ice. "Before you find yourself wishing you hadn't."

The thug hesitated, his gaze flicking between Gutenberg and the cloaked man, who hadn't moved a muscle. The tension in the air was palpable, like a thunderstorm waiting to break. Then, without an-

other word, the thug turned to his men, barking orders in a language Thomas didn't understand.

"Let's go," the thug growled, his voice laced with defeat. "We'll be back."

The men retreated into the shadows, disappearing as quickly as they had come, leaving nothing behind but the sound of their footsteps fading into the night. The rain continued to fall, the tension lingering in the air.

For a long moment, no one spoke. Thomas stood there, still panting, trying to regain control of his breathing. The grip on his throat had loosened, but his body still felt like it was on fire from the adrenaline.

Then Gutenberg stepped forward, his eyes hard and unreadable.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his tone sharp, yet concerned.

Thomas shook his head, still trying to steady himself. "No, but... they know what we're doing, master. They know what the Bible means. They'll stop at nothing to get it."

Gutenberg nodded slowly, his expression grim. "I've suspected as much. It was never going to be easy."

The cloaked figure stepped forward then, his movements deliberate and calculated. He was tall, with broad shoulders, and despite the dark cloak that shrouded his face, there was an unmistakable aura of danger about him. He held himself like a man who had seen war—too much of it. His eyes gleamed beneath the shadow of his hood, and when he spoke, his voice was low, gravelly.

"They're not the only ones," he said, his voice carrying a weight that made the air around them feel even heavier. "There are others, people far more dangerous than them, who are aware of what Gutenberg is doing. The Church, the nobles, the merchants they will all want a piece of it. They'll fight for control of the press, of the Bible. We need to be ready."

Thomas turned to the man, his eyes wide with disbelief. "Who are you?"

The man hesitated for a moment, and then slowly, he removed his hood, revealing a weathered face, marked by time and hardship. His eyes were sharp, piercing, and there was a hardness about him that

spoke of a life lived in the shadows.

"I am Johann," the man said, his voice rough but clear. "And I'm here to help protect what's yours."

Thomas's heart skipped a beat. He had never seen the man before, but there was something about him that felt like a lifeline. Something in his voice, something in his presence told Thomas that this was no ordinary ally.

Gutenberg spoke next, his voice low and resolute. "Johann is a man of... many talents. He's helped me before. He will help us now."

Thomas nodded slowly, still trying to process everything that had happened. He had just narrowly escaped death—and now, they were faced with an even greater threat. But in Johann's presence, there was a sense of hope, of resolve. If anyone could help them face the danger ahead, it was him.

"We need to move," Johann said abruptly, his eyes scanning the alley as though he expected the men to return at any moment. "The Church's agents won't waste time. Neither will the others."

Gutenberg turned to Thomas, his expression softening just for a moment. "Go with Johann. He will keep you safe while I continue my work."

Thomas nodded, grateful for the reassurance. “I’ll do what I can, master.”

With one last glance at Gutenberg, Thomas followed Johann into the darkness, the weight of the Bible pressing heavily on his chest. The storm had only just begun, and already, it was clear that nothing would ever be the same again.

IV.

The safehouse was buried deep in the heart of Mainz, tucked away in a shadowy corner of the city that few knew about, hidden from the busy market squares and crowded streets. A single candle flickered in the corner of the cramped room, casting long, jittery shadows on the rough-hewn walls. The faint smell of wet wool mixed with the mustiness of old wood, and in the stillness, the only sounds were the occasional creaks of the building and the distant rumblings of thunder outside.

Thomas sat on a rough wooden chair, his hands clenched into fists, trying to calm his racing thoughts. The pressure in his chest was unbearable. He wanted to ask Gutenberg more questions, to try and understand what had just happened, what was going to happen, but he couldn't find the words.

"We're safe here, aren't we?" he asked, his voice tight with a mixture of fear and confusion.

Gutenberg was standing by the window, his back to the dim room. His figure was tall and imposing, a man used to dealing with pressure. His gaze never left the street outside as he spoke.

"They know where we are, Thomas. If they want us, they'll come," he replied, his voice measured but filled with grim certainty. "But for now, we have one advantage: they don't know the full extent of what we've created. The Bible, our Bible is just a part of something much bigger."

"But... what about the type? The press?" Thomas felt the cold weight of their situation settle on his shoulders. The printing press was their lifeline, the weapon that could change everything but if they lost it, all their work would be for nothing.

"Don't worry about the press," Gutenberg said, his voice flat, "We'll move it."

Wilhelm, who had been sitting with his leg propped up on a stool, his wound freshly bandaged, looked up from where he was resting. His face was pale, the blood from his injury still soaking into the cloth, but his eyes were sharp.

“Do you think we can outsmart them, Johannes?” Wilhelm asked, his voice rough, a trace of doubt creeping into it. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, clearly agitated by the lack of control. “They will come for us, and they’ll come hard. The Church has too much invested in stopping you.”

Gutenberg turned slowly, his dark eyes narrowing as he studied Wilhelm for a moment before responding. His lips barely moved as he spoke, but there was a cold certainty in his words.

“We must outsmart them,” Gutenberg said, his tone unwavering. “The press is our only chance. The Bible will be printed, and nothing, no matter how powerful or ruthless, will stop us from spreading the word.”

But before they could discuss their next move, a sound from the street below shattered the fragile calm. It was the rhythmic clip-clop of hooves, sharp and steady, growing closer by the second. Thomas froze. He had learned to recognize the sound of approaching danger, and this was unmistakable. A patrol. Coming straight for them.

“They’ve found us,” Thomas hissed, his heart leaping into his throat. He rose to his feet, his hands trembling with a rush of panic.

Gutenberg's eyes darkened, his face a mask of cold determination. He stepped toward the door, his movements deliberate, and for the first time in a long while, Thomas saw the weariness in his mentor's face. The weight of everything of the Bible, of the press, of the danger that stalked them, was pressing down on him.

"We don't have much time," Gutenberg said, his voice urgent. "We move now. Keep the type safe. You know what to do, Thomas."

There was no time to waste. No time to think. Thomas grabbed a small satchel from the table, hastily throwing in the most important type blocks and a few sheets of paper. His fingers were slick with sweat, and every movement felt too slow, as if the pressure was crushing him. But even in the chaos, his mind was clear: he couldn't let the Bible, the words that had the power to change the world, fall into the wrong hands.

The door creaked open, and Gutenberg motioned for them to follow.

Thomas stepped out first, his eyes scanning the dark alley. The rain had stopped, but the streets were slick with mud and debris, the dim light of the few

scattered torches barely cutting through the heavy darkness. A gust of wind howled, making the hairs on his neck stand on end.

"We must get to the secondary safehouse," Gutenberg said, his voice low but urgent. "There's no time for anything else. Move quickly. Stay quiet."

Wilhelm limped behind them, his face twisted with pain, but he moved as fast as he could, determination in his eyes. The sound of hooves outside had grown louder, closer. They were running out of time.

Suddenly, the unmistakable sound of voices broke through the night. A shout. Then another. Thomas's heart pounded in his chest.

"They've spotted us," Wilhelm whispered, his face pale. "We won't make it to the secondary safehouse in time."

Gutenberg's eyes flicked to the end of the alley, his mind working at lightning speed. He glanced at Thomas, then at Wilhelm.

"Take the back route," Gutenberg commanded. "Through the tunnels beneath the city. I'll buy us some time."

"No!" Thomas protested. "We can't split up. It's too dangerous."

"I'll be fine," Gutenberg said, his tone resolute. "I have my own way of dealing with this. Go. Now."

Without another word, Gutenberg turned and disappeared into the shadows, moving swiftly, his footsteps barely making a sound. Thomas hesitated for a split second before he turned and followed Wilhelm toward the back of the building.

They had reached the hidden door when the first soldier appeared at the alley's entrance, his silhouette framed by the faint glow of torchlight.

"Move, Thomas!" Wilhelm hissed, shoving him toward the tunnel entrance. Thomas followed without question, his legs burning with the effort. Behind them, the soldier called out.

"Look alive! They've gone this way!"

The chase had begun.

The tunnel was narrow and dank, the air heavy with the smell of mold and wet stone. It felt like they were running through the bowels of the city, deeper into its dark heart. The stone walls pressed in on

them, the weight of the earth above them threatening to crush them at any moment.

They ran for what felt like an eternity, the sound of their footsteps echoing through the darkness. The distant shouts of the soldiers grew fainter, but Thomas knew they were still close. The narrow corridors twisted and turned, leading them further underground.

As they approached the final bend, a voice rang out from behind them.

"There they are! Stop them!"

Thomas's breath caught in his throat. He turned to see two soldiers rounding the corner, their swords drawn, their faces twisted in grim determination.

Wilhelm stopped, pulling Thomas back behind a large stone pillar. His face was drawn in pain, but his eyes were cold. He reached for a small, curved knife at his belt and handed it to Thomas.

"Hold them off," Wilhelm said. "I'll cover the exit."

"Wilhelm, no! We can't..." Thomas protested, but his voice faltered when he saw the look in Wilhelm's eyes.

"You're the one who can make this happen. Get to the safehouse. Take the type and don't stop running." His voice was steady, even though it trembled with effort.

Without another word, Wilhelm stepped out into the open, drawing his own sword with a sharp, metallic hiss. The soldiers hesitated, then charged. The fight was on.

Thomas's heart pounded in his chest as he sprinted toward the narrow exit of the tunnel, but the sound of the battle behind him only fuelled his panic. The fate of everything they had worked for was on the line.

He couldn't fail. He wouldn't.

As he emerged into the night air, the city of Mainz spread out before him, the threat still lingering in the shadows, but now, he had a single mission.

Survive.

And bring the Bible to the world.

V.

The city of Mainz was a labyrinth of shadows and narrow, winding streets. The air was thick with the scent of damp stone, mixed with the bitter tang of sweat and the metallic sharpness of fear. Thomas, Gutenberg, and Wilhelm ran with the kind of desperation that only comes when there is nowhere left to turn, their feet slapping against the cobblestones, their hearts hammering in their chests.

Thomas' breath came in ragged gasps. His legs burned with the effort, but he couldn't afford to stop, not now, not when everything was on the line. The Bible, the press, everything they had worked for, it was all about to slip through their fingers. Every step, every corner turned, brought them closer to their final chance, but the men behind them were relentless. Their pursuit was closing in, tightening like a noose.

The streets were deserted, save for the occasional flicker of light from a distant window, casting eerie, trembling shadows on the walls. There was no time to wonder who might be watching, who might be ready to betray them. Only one thought consumed Thomas: survive.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered by the sound of boots pounding on the cobblestones. They had been found.

Thomas felt a surge of panic, but he forced it down. Gutenberg was still ahead, his face a mask of grim determination, his long coat flapping behind him like a flag of defiance. Wilhelm, bloodied but resolute, kept pace, his expression a mixture of pain and resolve.

"They're closing in," Thomas gasped, his voice ragged with the effort. "What now?"

Gutenberg didn't answer at first, his sharp eyes scanning the alleyways, calculating, as always. They could see the men in the distance now, moving swiftly, weapons drawn, their steps purposeful. The leader of the group was at the front, a tall, imposing figure with cold eyes and a sneer that curled around the edges of his lips.

"You can't escape," the leader called, his voice carrying across the distance like a death sentence. "The Bible will belong to us."

"Not while I still breathe," Gutenberg said, his voice low but filled with a quiet intensity.

Then, without warning, he stopped. Thomas and Wilhelm skidded to a halt beside him, their eyes wide with confusion. Gutenberg reached into the folds of his coat, his hand slipping into a hidden pouch at his side. In one swift motion, he produced a small vial of clear liquid, which he held up before them.

"Stay back," Gutenberg ordered.

Before anyone could react, he hurled the vial to the ground. The explosion was deafening, a cloud of smoke erupted from the shattered glass, engulfing the alley in a thick, choking fog. Thomas stumbled backward, his hand instinctively reaching for Wilhelm to steady him.

"Run!" Gutenberg shouted through the mist, his voice cutting through the confusion.

Thomas didn't hesitate. He grabbed Wilhelm by the arm and bolted, the thick smoke wrapping around them like a shroud. Behind them, the men were

shouting in panic, their voices muffled and distant as they scrambled to make sense of the chaos.

Thomas' mind raced. This was their chance. They had to make it to the river.

"Keep moving!" Wilhelm hissed, his breath harsh. "We're not safe yet!"

The sound of hooves on the cobblestone echoed in the distance, the patrols on horseback now closing in on all sides. The streets twisted ahead, narrow and dark, but they could hear the water now. The river. The final barrier between them and their pursuers.

Gutenberg was ahead of them, his silhouette barely visible in the smoke. He was moving with purpose, as though he knew exactly where he was going, and Thomas followed, trusting him without question.

When they finally broke free of the smoke, they emerged onto the riverbank, the dark, slow-moving waters stretching out before them. The city's skyline loomed in the distance, an uninviting maze of buildings that held no comfort, no safety.

"We made it," Wilhelm breathed, his voice shaking with a mix of relief and disbelief. He stood at the edge of the river, looking out at the blackened horizon. "We actually made it."

Thomas looked at him, then back toward the distant lights of the city. His heart was still racing, the adrenaline still coursing through his veins. But something felt wrong. The battle was far from over.

"We didn't make it yet," Thomas said quietly, his voice filled with doubt. "Look."

In the distance, shadows moved across the city's edge. Dark figures, ominous and relentless. The soldiers had regrouped. They were not far behind.

"They'll follow us to the river," Gutenberg said, his voice cutting through the tension. He was calm, but Thomas could see the worry in his eyes. The game wasn't over, not by a long shot. "We'll need to cross. Now."

Without waiting for a response, Gutenberg turned and started toward the wooden docks that led to the boats. The river was their only chance, if they could make it across, they might be able to disappear into the night, but the soldiers would not be far behind. There was no room for error.

But as they reached the edge of the dock, the sound of approaching hooves grew louder.

"They're here," Wilhelm whispered, his face pale.

Thomas's eyes darted to the boats. There was only one that would take them across, a small rowboat tethered at the far end of the dock. But there was no time to waste.

"Help me with the boat!" Gutenberg shouted, already moving toward it. His voice was sharp, commanding.

The men rushed to the boat, but just as they were about to untie it, a voice rang out from the shadows.

"There's no escape for you, Gutenberg!" the leader called, his voice full of menace. "The Bible will burn with you."

Thomas's stomach twisted with fear as the leader and his men appeared at the far end of the dock, weapons raised.

"Get in the boat, now!" Gutenberg shouted, his eyes never leaving the men.

They scrambled into the boat, Thomas and Wilhelm helping Gutenberg into the front, but before they could push off, the soldiers were upon them.

The leader stepped forward, his sword gleaming in the moonlight. "The Bible will be ours. Your death will be the last chapter."

Gutenberg looked at Thomas, his face a mask of resolve. “Push off!” he ordered.

But just as the boat lurched forward, the leader lunged, his sword slashing through the air. Thomas barely dodged it, the blade missing his shoulder by inches.

“Go!” Gutenberg shouted, his voice full of raw urgency.

Wilhelm threw himself into the oars, his muscles straining as the boat moved away from the dock. The soldiers were closing in, but the current was swift, carrying them away from the danger, away from the men who sought to destroy everything they had worked for.

But just as the boat cleared the dock, a sharp cry pierced the air.

Thomas turned, his heart sinking as he saw the leader raise his crossbow, the bolt already aimed at them. It was too late to dodge.

The bolt flew through the air with deadly speed.

The last thing Thomas saw before everything went black was the desperate look in Gutenberg’s eyes, his

hand outstretched as though to shield them from the inevitable.

The crossbow bolt struck.

The world went dark.

* * * * *

The river flowed relentlessly, its waters carrying secrets and stories of those who had tried, and failed, to change the world. The night swallowed all that had happened, leaving only the ripples to mark their passing.

But in Mainz, the press stood silent, waiting. The Bible would be printed, but it would never be known who had been the true authors of the revolution that had begun in the shadow of that dark, moonlit night.

The book of all prints

James O. Miller

Ovi eBook Publishing 2025

Ovi eBook Publishing
Design: Thanos

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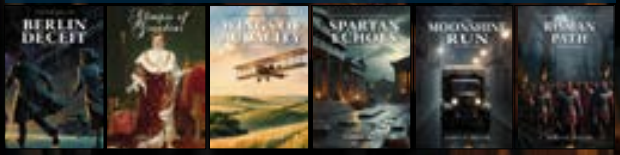
A book that would change the course of history.

THE BOOK OF ALL PRINTS

A HISTORICAL NOVEL

James O. Miller. After 23 years of high school teaching history and four years teaching in Germany retirement didn't come well especially since I hate gardening and golf. So I decided to exercise my imagination combined with my academic knowledge.



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